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Excerpt

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P. VERGILI MARONIS

AENEIS.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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IN turning from the Eclogues and Georgics to the Aeneid, we are no longer confronted by the opinion which insists on Virgil's claims as a strictly original poet. The days are past when Scaliger could compare Virgil and Homer in detail, and pronounce that the scholar had in almost every instance excelled his master; nor would a modern reader easily tolerate even those less invidious parallels, such as were not infrequent in the last century, where Virgil was measured against Homer on the same principles on which Johnson has measured Pope against Dryden, and with substantially the same results. It is hard to read without a smile the apologetic tone in which Pope himself vindicates Homer against the admirers of Virgil, pleading that the old Greek has at all events the advantage of having written first; that if he had a less cool judgment, he holds the heart under a stronger enchantment, and that to endeavour to exalt Virgil at his expense is much the same as if one should think to raise the superstructure by undermining the foundation<sup>1</sup>. It is now the turn of the critic of the Aeneid to use the language of extenuation and speak with bated breath. On the one side it is admitted, as it is asserted on the other, that in undertaking the Aeneid at the command of a superior Virgil was venturing beyond the province of his genius, and that all we can expect to find is the incidental success which could not fail to be obtained even on uncongenial ground by the poet of the Georgics. I have elsewhere explained the reasons which lead me to question the appropriateness of the special praise usually given to Virgil's agricultural poetry, and conceded, though with more hesitation, to his pastoral compositions, as if the true bent of his mind were to be found in his sympathy with external nature, at the same time that I have spoken as strongly as it was in my power to speak of the marvellous grace and delicacy, the evidences of a culture most elaborate and most refined, which shine out in the midst of a thousand incongruities of costume and outward circumstance, and make us forget that we are reading Bucolic poems of which line after line is to be found in Theocritus, and precepts about husbandry which are far more

<sup>1</sup> Preface to Homer.

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intelligibly stated in Theophrastus or in the *Geoponica*. It is precisely this measure which I would wish now to extend to the *Aeneid*. So far it may seem that I am substantially at one with the opinion which I have mentioned as that which is now generally entertained on Virgil's claims as an epic poet. It is possible however that the habit of sharply contrasting the characteristics of the several works of Virgil may have led to an exaggeration on the one side, as I believe it has on the other,—that the *Aeneid* may have been brought too exclusively to the standard of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and that Virgil may have been blamed, as Pope complains that Homer has been blamed, for not doing what he never intended.

There can be little doubt that too much has been made of Virgil's supposed disqualification or disinclination for epic poetry. We have his own confession in the *Sixth Eclogue* that his early ambition was to sing of kings and battles: and though Phoebus may have whispered in his ear that such themes were too high for one so young, so humble, and so unknown, we are not obliged to conclude that the aspiration was then and there finally abandoned, or that as he rose naturally from short pastorals to a long didactic poem, he may not have cherished the hope of rising by an equally natural ascent to a still longer epic. If Pope's epic poem of *Alcander* was the dream of his boyhood, when he fancied himself the greatest poet that ever lived, his epic poem on *Brutus* was no less the vision of his later years, when he had come, as he thought, to take a just measure of his powers. That Augustus may have exercised some pressure on Virgil, urging him to undertake heroic poetry, is very possible; but Virgil's words in the *Third Georgic*, and the similar language held by other poets, such as Horace and Propertius, would lead us to agree with a recent German editor<sup>2</sup>, that what the emperor wished for was a direct celebration of his own actions; nor is there any thing, even in the apocryphal notices of the pseudo-biographer, to compel us to any other conclusion. It was only natural that Augustus should take an interest, as we know him to have done, in the progress of a poem which, in grandeur of scope and compass, promised to transcend any previous effort of the Roman muse, and so could not but reflect indirect glory on his reign. We may observe, however, that in the only words of Virgil on the subject which have come down to us<sup>3</sup> the poet expresses himself with considerable reserve, and is by no means forward to gratify the imperial curiosity. Nor need we to lay any stress on the story which, supported as it is by the authority of the elder Pliny<sup>4</sup>, there seems no reason to doubt, that Virgil himself, when dying, condemned his *Aeneid* to the flames. Rightly understood, that story seems to con-

<sup>2</sup> Gossrau, *Praef. ad Aeneidem*.<sup>3</sup> Macrobius, *Sat. i. 24*.<sup>4</sup> *Nat. Hist. vii. 30*.

tain, not a confession that he had mistaken his powers, but simply one more instance of the fastidious and exacting nature of his self-criticism. The words of the pseudo-biographer, who in this case at least is telling a plausible tale, inform us distinctly that it was the uncorrected and unfinished state of the work which made Virgil anxious that it should not survive him, “*comhuri iussit ut rem inemendam imperfectamque*”<sup>5</sup>. The explanation is consonant to all that we know of Virgil’s character, as shown in his writings; and it can only be a private opinion which we may ourselves entertain about the merit of the poem that would lead us to seek for any other. The biographer tells us, and here again his story is credible enough, that Virgil was overtaken by death at the time when he was intending to spend three years in polishing and elaborating the *Aeneid*: and we may imagine for ourselves what would be the value of three years of correction in the judgment of a poet like Virgil, and how abortive he might consider the work which had lost the advantage of so long a gestation. We cannot, indeed, except in a very few obvious cases, such as the hemistichs, tell what may have been the actual shortcomings of the poem as they appeared to its author. He may have introduced verses, as the story says he did, which were intended as mere temporary make-shifts<sup>6</sup>, props to stay the building until more solid supports should be forthcoming; but modern criticism has not in general been very happy in pointing out these weak places, and for the present we must be content to admit that, as regards the execution of the poem, at any rate, our conceptions of what is required fall infinitely short of Virgil’s own; and that though we may hope, in some measure, to appreciate what he has done, we can form no notion of what he left yet to do. Such an admission of ignorance is no more than the tribute which we pay, naturally and cheerfully, to a consummate artist. In any case, we need not doubt that the feeling which made Virgil wish to rob the world of his greatest poem was simply the mortification of leaving in a state of comparative imperfection a work which he had intended to be his masterpiece. To imagine that he was sensible of the unreality which, to a certain extent, characterizes the *Aeneid*, as compared with the Homeric poems, is to imagine an anachronism and an impossibility, to attribute to him a thought which is inconsistent with the whole tenor of his writings, and must have been alien to the entire current of sentiment among his contemporaries, whether admiring or adverse. He seems never to have tormented himself with doubts that he had not realized the rustic vigour of Theocritus, or the primitive simplicity of Hesiod. He appropriates their form boldly and openly, and does not ask himself whether he has reproduced their spirit. To be the Roman

<sup>5</sup> Donatus, *Life of Virgil*, § 14. 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* § 9. 35.

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Homer; to write the sequel of the tale of Troy, not as an inferior, but as an equal, not as a younger son of the victorious race, but as the heir of those many ages which had lifted the conquered people to a height far above their conquerors; to combine the glories of the heroic age with the august antiquities of his own nation; this was an ideal which might well captivate a mind like Virgil's, and which less partial voices than those of an applauding court might have told him that he was able to attain.

The chasm which separates the Aeneid from the Iliad and Odyssey is undoubtedly one which is not easily spanned. It is true that sufficient account has not always been taken of the numerous intervening objects which break the distance and afford resting-places to the eye. The substance of the Homeric poetry, the conduct of the action and the conception of the actors, came to Virgil modified by the intermediate agency of the Greek drama. His view of the form may have been similarly affected by the example of those later Greek epics of which the poem of Apollonius is the only surviving specimen, and by the precepts of that critical fraternity of which the author of the Argonautics was no undistinguished member. But the unsurpassed eminence of the two writers, the bard or bards of pre-historic Greece and the poet of Augustan Rome, will always make them prominent objects of comparison or contrast; and the parallel is itself one which Virgil, far from avoiding, has done his utmost to challenge. To a modern reader the exactness of the parallel only serves to make the contrast deeper and more unmistakeable. Mr. Gladstone says nothing which a critic not sworn, like himself, absolutely to the service of Homer, need hesitate to admit, when he calls attention to the extraordinary amount of admitted imitation and obvious similarity on the surface of the Aeneid, and pronounces nevertheless that the poem stands in almost every fundamental particular in the strongest contrast to the Iliad<sup>7</sup>. Both features, the identity and the diversity, are, as I have just said, sufficiently familiar to us; we have seen them in Virgil's treatment of Theocritus and Hesiod, and we shall not be surprised to meet them again in his treatment of Homer. On the identity, indeed, there is but little to say which has not been anticipated in what I have advanced in my Introduction to the Eclogues. The diversity is a more complex question, and may well occupy us somewhat longer.

The production of the Aeneid was part of that general burst of literary enthusiasm which distinguished the Augustan period. Roman

<sup>7</sup> Studies on Homer, vol. iii. p. 502. I may here express my obligations generally to this part of Mr. Gladstone's work, which has in fact suggested much of the present Essay, though I have mostly found myself unable to agree with his views.

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literature had always been imitative; Pacuvius and Attius had set themselves to make the best they could out of Sophocles and Aeschylus<sup>8</sup>; and it was doubtless in his own judgment, as well as in that of eulogistic critics, that Ennius appeared to be wise and brave, and a second Homer<sup>9</sup>. But the period which witnessed the establishment of the empire generated new hopes and aspirations among the poets of Rome. The fervour of an age, half revolutionary, half organic in its character, had produced intellectual activities which the imperial system was not slow to welcome and cherish. The writers of the new era saw that Greece had as yet yielded but few of her spoils to her semi-barbarous invaders; and they planned fresh expeditions, which should be undertaken under more exalted auspices, and return crowned with greener and more luxuriant laurels. The ebullition of anticipated triumph which opens the Third Georgic doubtless represents the real feeling of the poet, though the vision which he there professes to see does not correspond in its details with that which his better genius afterwards revealed to him. Greece was to be conquered, and conquered with her own weapons. The games were to be the veritable Olympic games, transplanted to the banks of the Mincio, those games of which the race and the caestus are the type; and the ceremonial of the day is to be varied with the accessories of a Roman triumph. It was in this spirit that he addressed himself to the task of reproducing Homer. The imitation of externals was a thing not to be avoided or dexterously concealed, but to be openly and boldly embraced; and it was the hitherto unapproached excellence of the model which was held to constitute the glory of the success. Even in his own day there appear to have been critics, probably rival versifiers, who reproached him with having taken so much from Homer; and the answer which he is said to have made shows the light in which he wished his own labours to be regarded<sup>1</sup>. "Let them try to steal for themselves as they say I have stolen for myself, and they will find that it is easier to rob Hercules of his club than to rob Homer of a single verse." It was an act of high-handed brigandage, which, rightly appreciated, carried with it its own justification. In the long hours of laborious days, paring down and refining the verses which had been poured out in the exuberance of the morning<sup>2</sup>, he had grappled with the Grecian Hercules, and had again and again wrested from

<sup>8</sup> Hor. 2 Ep. 1. 161 foll.<sup>9</sup> Hor. 2 Ep. 1. 50 foll. The 'somnia Pythagorea' are evidence enough of what he thought of his relation to Homer.<sup>1</sup> Donatus, § 16. 64, who gives the authority of Asconius Pedianus. He adds, however, something about Virgil resolving to yield to the pertinacity of his critics; but the precise meaning is not clear, as the words seem to be corrupt.<sup>2</sup> Gellius 17. 10, Donatus, § 9. 33. Quintilian, Inst. 10. 3, cites Varus for the statement that the number of verses composed by Virgil daily was very small.

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him that weapon which had so long been the terror of meaner freebooters<sup>3</sup>. I have elsewhere remarked on Virgil's absolute silence about Homer, who, throughout the *Aeneid*, is never named or even indicated; but no one would interpret it as the silence of a writer anxious to ignore or conceal his obligations. Even were epic narrative as favourable to the introduction of personal notices as pastoral dialogue or didactic disquisition, it would have been superfluous to mention Homer in a poem which invites comparison with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in its whole external form, and even in its very title, and contains an imitation or translation from Homer in almost every page.

This avowed rivalry, I venture to think, should be borne in mind in estimating, not only the similarity of the Homeric and Virgilian epics, but their discrepancies. When we require that Virgil, drawing as he does his characters from the circle of Homeric legend, should exhibit them as they are exhibited in Homer, we are not only forgetting what Virgil could scarcely have forgotten if he would, the changes which those characters underwent as they passed under the hands of Attic and Alexandrian schools of poetry, but we are mistaking the whole attitude assumed by Virgil with reference to his illustrious predecessor. Homer, in his eyes, is not the father alike of history and of poetry, the sole authority for all our knowledge about the Greeks and the Trojans, their ethnology, their polity, their moral relations to each other; he is the rival poet of a rival nation, the party chronicler of a quarrel which the Trojans had bequeathed to their successors, and those successors, after many centuries, had pushed to a victorious issue. Was it likely that a Trojan would have accepted the Homeric estimate of his nation and his nation's cruel enemies? and was it to be expected that the heir of the Trojans should dwarf his representation of Trojan worth and Trojan valour to a Homeric standard? The lions had at last come to be the painters; and though they could not represent their progenitor as victorious over the man in that great legendary struggle, they could portray it as a contest of fraud and cruelty with heroic endurance and genuine bravery; they could poise the event more doubtfully in the balance, and call down indignation on the crimes that stained the hour of triumph; they could point to the retribution which fell, even within the period of the legend, on the homes of those who had made others homeless, and shadow forth in prophetic vision the yet more terrible recompense which history was to bring in the fulness of time. Aeneas

<sup>3</sup> That this view of the character of Virgil's imitations was taken by the ancients themselves is shown by a passage in the Third 'Suasoria' of the elder Seneca (quoted by Heyne, *Dissertatio de Carmine Epico Vergiliano*), who says, speaking of a supposed appropriation of Virgil's words by Ovid, "fecisse quod in multis aliis versibus Vergilius fecerat, non surripiendi causa sed palam imitandi, hoc animo ut vellet adgnosci."

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is drawn by Homer at a time when, from the nature of the case, he could only play a secondary part in the action; yet Homer admits his reputation among his countrymen, and grudgingly concedes his real prowess, while he makes the Trojan hero's future the special concern of destiny, provided for even by those gods who are the fiercest enemies of Troy. Virgil takes up his story when he is left alone as the one surviving protector of his country, the forlorn hope of those who sought to resist, during the sack of the city, the recognized leader of the Trojan migration. Worst of as he had been by Achilles, and even by Diomed, it was no less true that he had been a terror to the lords of the Danaans and the armies of Agamemnon; nor was there any reason why he and his Trojans should not prove too strong for the Italian nations, though they had proved too weak for the forces of Greece. Even in Homer it is easy to see that the character of Ulysses has more sides than one: he is the prince of policy, because with him every species of fraud is lawful; and it is natural that his stratagems should be differently estimated by those in whose favour they are exercised and those to whom they brought havoc, exile, and death. Virgil, it is true, represents his Ulysses as engaging in crimes from which the Homeric Ulysses would probably have shrunk; but we must not judge a poet as we should judge a historian who were to invent actions in order to support a preconceived theory of character. If the right of independent treatment be conceded, it must be allowed to extend, not only to the interpretation of character, but to the invention of incident. Regarding Homer as a party chronicler, Virgil was not bound to assume that he has recorded all the actions of his hero, any more than that he has given a true colour to those actions which he has recorded. And so the poet of Troy, having taken such a measure as it was in the nature of a Trojan to take of Troy's subtlest enemy, might fairly avail himself of any post-Homeric tradition which might serve the cause that he had to advocate, or even create for himself new traditions, so long as they were plausible and consistent. "Aut famam sequere, aut sibi convenientia finge." To be plausible and consistent are a poet's sole historical duties; and in this instance plausibility and consistency are to be estimated, not according to the view which sets up Homer as the one record of historical truth, but according to that which regards his poems as pieces of advocacy, the answers to which have been lost. The image is indeed something more than a mere metaphor. We know that in the Greek schools of rhetoric attempts were frequently made to overturn the verdict, not only of history, but of fable; and we may recall with a smile the fact that it was not merely sophistical acumen, but real sympathy with a friendly nation, which led Greek orators to rehabilitate Busiris, and purge Egypt from the stain of a legendary participation in the guilt

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of human sacrifices. Virgil has obtained leave to reargue the case of his countrymen; and all that is required of him is that his facts and inferences should be such as would have been credible to a Trojan warrior. Bearing this in mind, we may remember that if Aeneas calls Ulysses "fell," "relentless," and "the inventor of crime," it is when he is speaking of the sack of Troy, or of the carrying off of the statue which made Troy impregnable. If Sinon represents him as a treacherous, artful glozer, it is when he is describing plots laid against his friend's life and his own. If Deiphobus knows him only as the counsellor of deeds of wrong, we may pardon the one-sided judgment of a person who has been hewn by him as a carcase fit for hounds, and remains mangled even in his ghostly body. Such men were not likely to sympathize with the admiration expressed by the Homeric Antenor, as on the day that was to bring the war to a peaceful close, he recalled the impression made on him by his illustrious guest in by-gone years, before the war began. Nor is it less perfectly in keeping that the Rutulians should disparage the wiles of Ulysses in comparison of their own more daring exploits, at the same time that it leads us to admire the art of the poet, who has thus condemned the most formidable enemies of Troy out of the mouth of other enemies, who were destined to prove less formidable. As little could it be expected that the Aeneas of Virgil should appreciate the lights and shades distributed over the character of the Homeric Helen. How he regarded her during the siege we are not told; he may have shared the mixed feeling of admiration and disapproval which the old men on the wall express in their hour of respite; he may have partaken of the sense of repulsion with which, as she tells us in her wail over Hector, she was looked upon by all in Troy; but as his eye fell upon her at the moment of the sack of the royal palace, and the savage slaughter of the good old king, thoughts of hatred and vengeance could hardly fail to be uppermost in his mind; and he may well have needed a supernatural interposition to teach him to distinguish between the authors of so terrible a ruin and its wretched instrument. Let us once fix in our minds that Homer is the poet of the Greeks, and that his action is laid during the siege, that Virgil is the poet of the Trojans, and that his action is laid after the burning of the city, and we shall not, I think, be disposed to charge Virgil with mere wanton deprecation of the Homeric characters.

The same notion of independent rivalry will explain Virgil's neglect of Homeric traditions in other matters where patriotic feeling or dramatic propriety was not concerned. Virgil doubtless held himself bound to follow Homer's narrative only so far as that narrative had taken hold of the popular mind of Rome. He was not the interpreter of an ancient record, bound to minute and painstaking accuracy; he was the reviver

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of an old story, which in its broad features was familiar to all lovers of poetry. The relative position of the various members of the royal family of Troy, the distinctions of races among the hosts that respectively made up the Greek and Trojan armies, the extent of the names Pergamus, Ilium, and Dardania, the comparative importance of the Scamander and the Simois, the geographical details of countries which few Romans had ever visited,—these were not points that interested the Roman readers of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, nor were they likely to be scrutinized by Roman readers of the *Aeneid*. The very care which Virgil has taken to construct his own catalogue of the Italian forces, might naturally be thought to absolve him from the duty of minutely studying catalogues with which even an educated Roman felt he had no concern. The indifference of the Romans to the history of other countries is a known feature in their character<sup>4</sup>; curious about the antiquities of their own nation, they had but little of that historical spirit which impels a student to investigate records entirely unconnected with himself; and Virgil was a type of his countrymen, alike in his learning and in his carelessness or ignorance. Besides, the body of knowledge already existing at Rome, and the habits of ordinary speech, would have been a serious impediment to Virgil, even if he had wished to follow Homer faithfully. As he was obliged to talk of Jupiter, Juno, and Mars, to a nation which had agreed to identify the Greek gods with those whom they were themselves worshipping daily, so he could hardly have avoided calling the Greeks by that generic name by which the Romans knew them, though it had no existence in Homer's time, and had never really belonged to more than an infinitesimally small part of the Greek people. If we, with our appreciation of historical criticism, find it impossible not to talk of Greece and the Greeks, what would it have been to a Roman, to whom the name was a contemporary fact, and who spoke of 'Graecia' and 'Graeci' as we speak of Germany and Germans? With this cardinal offence against history and ethnology staring him in the face, Virgil would have found it in vain to affect or aim at accuracy. Accordingly, he appeals indifferently to all the associations of his readers, whether vague or exact. Here he takes advantage of an obscure tradition; there, of a loose popular identification. He talks of Dorians at a time when the Dorians were scarcely known, and confers on the Trojans the name of their Phrygian neighbours. He generalizes from a part to the whole, and then comes down from the whole to some other part; just as where, in describing the Trojan horse, he first speaks of it as pine-wood, then as maple, and lastly as oak; not, I think, from confusion or forgetfulness, but as an assertion of the poet's privilege to

<sup>4</sup> See Bunsen, *Egypt*, vol. i. pp. 152 foll. (Cottrell's translation.)